

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH



COUNTY OF SAN BERNARDINO

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Protection Against Recreational Water Illnesses (RWI)

Summer is officially here and staff at San Bernardino County Environmental Health Services is urging all county residents to monitor the chlorine and pH levels in their backyard swimming pools. Chlorine and pH, the disinfection team, are the first defense against germs that can make swimmers sick.

Chlorine kills germs in pools but it takes time to work. A few germs can survive in chlorinated water for several hours to several days in pools, hot tubs, and spas and you can therefore get infected. It is important to maintain proper levels of chlorine to kill germs. All sorts of things can reduce chlorine levels in pool water. Some examples are sunlight, dirt, debris, skin, and fecal matter from swimmers' bodies. Even the best-maintained pool can spread illness.

Why is pH important? First, the germ-killing power of chlorine varies with pH level. As pH goes up, the ability of chlorine to kill germs goes down. Second, a swimmer's body has a pH between 7.2 and 7.8, so if the pool water isn't kept in this range then swimmers will start to feel irritation of their eyes and skin. Keeping the pH in this range will balance chlorine's germ-killing power while minimizing skin and eye irritation. The best way to kill germs is by routinely measuring and adjusting both chlorine and pH levels.

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What kinds of illnesses can people get from swimming?

- Diarrhea
- Skin rashes
- Ear infections
- Eye infections
- Respiratory infections

Diarrhea is one of the most common RWIs. It is spread when infected germs from human or animal feces gets in to the water. If the contaminated water is swallowed it can cause people to become ill. It is important that swimmers don't swim when ill with diarrhea, don't swallow pool water, take frequent bathroom breaks and practice good hygiene.

A well-maintained pool, which includes properly using the pump and filter, prevents mosquitoes from breeding as well as keeps the water clear so swimmers can be seen while swimming at the pool bottom. Combining healthy swimming behaviors with good chlorine and pH control will reduce the spread of recreational water illnesses.

Citizens of San Bernardino County can call Environmental Health Services at (909) 884-4056 if they have questions or visit the web site www.sbcounty/dehs or www.cdc.gov/healthyswimming.

MARK H. UFFER
County Administrative Officer

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